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ABSTRACT

The basic premise of the paper is that the Constitution should be the main theme of courses in United States history at grade 8. Students should study a unit on the Constitution, as is commonly done at that level. In addition, other units taught throughout the school year should emphasize constitutional principles, values, and issues. Three reasons support this premise. First, civic education is the central purpose of 8th grade United States history courses. Second, the Constitution in its history and meaning embodies core principles and values that lie at the heart of civic education and citizenship. Key concepts of American citizenship, such as liberty, equal treatment under law, consent of the governed, majority rule, and minority rights cannot be understood without knowledge of the Constitution in United States history and contemporary society. Third, adolescent students are at a period of cognitive development when they are able to comprehend and apply abstract ideas about constitutional government. Thus, the eighth grade is a prime time to emphasize constitutional history, because students are beginning to develop an ability for a formal understanding and learning of political concepts. The study of the Constitution, and of the decisive events and issues in constitutional history enables students to comprehend the struggle of American men and women to achieve high ideals of human dignity and civic responsibility. (TRS)

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Teaching United States History with a Constitutional Focus

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Teaching United States History with a Constitutional Focus

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The basic premise of this institute is that 8th grade United States history classes should be taught with a focus on the Constitution. Not only should students study a unit on the Constitution, as is commonly done in most classes at the present time, but every other unit which is taught through out the school year should be explicitly designed with the Constitution in mind. There are good reasons which support this premise.

Reason # 1: Civic education is the central purpose of 8th grade United States History Courses.

Although multiple perspectives exist on the precise meaning of citizenship education, there is little doubt that the central purpose of the eighth grade curriculum is the civic education of American youth. This is attested to by the fact that eighth grade studies in United States history and the Constitution are mandated through out the United States and constitute a "curricular commonplace" in the social studies of American youth (White, 1981, Pp. 63-88). Even more significant is the fact that guidelines for instruction and course outlines routinely refer to the importance of teaching

students about United States history **so that they will become responsible citizens**.

However, the various arguments for citizenship education are not straight forward. On the surface every society has expectations for the younger generation. There is a cultural heritage to preserve and to enrich, but within society there are tensions and competing forces which make harmony of educational purpose and direction uncertain. Nowhere is this complexity more apparent than within the civic education curriculum. The uncertainty of purpose and direction in civic education has led, many believe, to our present situation in which the social studies curriculum does not adequately prepare young people for political participation in our society.

The implementation of this curriculum has been questioned. The report of the National Task Force On Citizenship Education clearly outlines the dimensions of the problem:

> An abundance of research data indicates that the nation's young people have scant knowledge about the responsibilities of citizenship or how to become involved in government. Data also reveal an increasing disrespect among the young for the most important institutions of society ... every examination of young people's knowledge and opinions reveals that both the critical and supportive attitudes of the young float atop an abyss of ignorance (Brown, 1977, p. 1).

In particular, citizenship education has been criticized strongly for failing to provide students "with a realistic understanding of modern political processes ..." and continuing to treat students as "passive objects of highly doctrinaire perscriptions totally divorced from the real world of politics" (O'Neill, 1982, p. 200).

Furthermore, the political functions of education, it has been alleged, conflict with the civic education of youngsters (Zeigler and Peak, 1970). The strong criticisms of civic education include not only treating students as passive objects (Shermis and Barth, 1982), but creating a curriculum of orthodoxy and symbolic measures of loyalty which stress "ideal norms and ignore the tougher, less pleasant facts of political life" (Hess and Torney, 1967 quoted in Zeigler and Peak, 1970, p. 120). The curriculum of civic education, it is suggested, is built on a "community of assumptions" which create an atmosphere of noninstruction; "the basic argument is that . . . education is unrealistic; not because of what is said, but more because of what is not said" (Zeigler and Peak, 1970, p.126).

The question of the implementation of the citizenship education curriculum is complex. There are a wide range of explanations accounting for the widely accepted view that the implementation of this curriculum has not been effective in contributing to the civic literacy and citizenship participation of students. Although there is not a consensus on the proper course of action to correct the situation there is a general agreement that something needs to be done. The Carnegie Foundation For The Advancement Of Teaching Report, Higher Learning In The Nation's Service, for example, states that "unless we find better ways to educate ourselves as citizens, we run the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of dark age .... (Boyer, 1981, p.1).

Reason #2 The Constitution, its history and meaning are at the heart of Civic education:

The United States Constitution constitutes the central focus for the civic education strand of the eighth grade curriculum. It is the document which offers the greatest curricular resource for the full development of the students' political frame of reference in our society. The Constitution is supported by a diverse and rich body of literature, the knowledge of which provides access to understanding the meaning of the Constitution in the past and present. The study of the Constitution offers the opportunity to incorporate literature from history, political science, and philosophy into the subject matter content, activities, and materials of the eighth grade course. The students are at a point of development in which they experience a transition from concrete to formal thinking. It is essential that they have the opportunity to take up consideration of the first principles upon which our political society is grounded; principles which guide and influence the society in which they will carry out their lives.

At first glance it would appear that the teaching of the Constitution is a straightforward instructional task. The Constitution is well written and brief. It enunciates basic and permanent principles of government stated in broad terms. The Constitution organizes institutions of government and provides a framework for political interrelationships. Furthermore, the Constitution is a product of historical experiences which serve to illustrate various aspects of government and it is the creation of individuals most of whom lived lives which are relatively well known. The central purpose of the Constitution is succinctly set out in the preamble. As one historian once wrote of the Constitution:

> It ranks above every other Constitution for the instrinsic excellence of its scheme, its adaptation to the circumstances of the people, the simplicity, brevity, and precision of its language, its judicious mixture of definitiveness in principal with elasticity in detail (Bryce, 1959, p. 188)

First glances are deceptive. The Constitution's surface appearance of simplicity masks a deep structure of interconnected and often conflicting principles. Corwin (1936) suggested that the Constitution has been both an instrument and a symbol; an instrument of national government and power and an object of popular worship. This duality offers a challenge to the eighth grade teacher and requires an alertness to the views presented in textbooks and other materials which might mislead student readers. Consideration of surface appearances, simple structure and processes of government lead students to develop a shallow view inappropriate to their future role as citizens in our democratic society.

The duality of form and function in the Constitution has also been characterized by Diggins (1983). He suggests that in the consideration of America's first principles there is a tension between the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Constitutionalists stress understanding how power is to be controlled while Declarationists stress understanding how liberty is to be encouraged. It is suggested by this line of reasoning that inherent in the very roots of American political life is a conflict regarding the relationship betwen liberty and authority; self-interest and social interests. The eighth grade teacher is faced with the challenge of guiding students

toward an understanding of the "idea of America" in the light of this persisting tension.

There are certain key concepts and generalizations regarding the politics of freedom which can not easily be understood in our society without an understanding of the Constitution. These include principles of justice or equal treatment under the law; consent of the governed under some form of majority rule; freedom to inquire and think, as well as speak and write, as a necessary condition of liberty; and the freedom of choice in manner of life (Koch, 1963, Pp. 133-135). The ideas of liberty, due process of law, equality, property, and authority also represent an essential background to the Constitution (Starr, 1977, Pp. 83-95). Specific governmental concepts such as the rule of law and established procedures, consent and representation in decision making, prohibition of arbitrary authority, separation of power as a means to restrain factions, and federalism as a means to preserve local authority and maintain national unity are essential to an understanding of the complex interrelationships and nesting of ideas inherent in the Constitution and critical to an understanding of individual civic responsibility (Oliver & Shaver 1962, Pp. 70-78).

These concepts and generalizations are of particular importance to the eighth grade teacher, not only because they are critical to the students understanding the Constitution, but because they signify the importance of thought in American political development. As Koch has noted "America was conceived in thought before it came to be" (1963, p. 123). Considering the fact that the adolescent student is at a developmental turning point in which formal thinking schema begin to emerge, it is clearly important for the teacher to take into account the thoughts which are judged by historians to have guided the formation of institutions in American society; Institutions

which it is presumed the adolescent will support and nurture as a consequence of the teachers' actions. Hanna Arendt (1961) captured the sense of this important idea when reflecting on the crisis of education of the 1960's. At that time she wrote:

> "education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from ruin which, except for the renewal, except for the coming of the new and young [our students], would be inevitable" (p.196).

Reason #3 Adolescence students are at a particularly appropriate period of development for civic education.

It is during adolescence that students approach formal thinking operations. They develop the ability to consider alternative possibilities and hypotheses at a sophisticated level, as well as to integrate a range of different kinds of concerns and information before making decisions. These abilities are typical of those needed to understand political behavior. (Elkind, 1983; White and Speisman, 1977; Mosher, 1979). Adolescent students are ready for civic education. Adelson has noted the critical importance of the adolescent years in which there occurs a period of political and ideological development. He believes adolescence is the "watershed era in the emergence of political thought" (Adelson, 1971, p. 1013). During the early period of adolescence the youngster has a strong authoritarian view affecting the understanding of crime and punishment, government and politics, as well as a limited ability to understand the idea of political rights. As they progress through the period of adolescence the students' view

changes provided there are appropriate experiences which support principled thinking. Adelson's findings are supported by the research of Eyler (1980) on the relationship between principled thinking and tolernace for conflict and diversity. Principled thinkers, for example, more often extend the concepts of majority rule and minority rights to specific groups as well as conceive the citizenship role as active involvement (Pp. 11-27). It is during their progress through the adolescent period that the youngsters are particularly ready to develop a formal understanding of these political concepts (Lipsitz, 1980, Pp. 47-51).

Adolescents' comprehension of the subject matter is related to their comprehension of the logical substructure of the subject matter and instructional tasks. The concept of government, for example, involves a complex interrelating of temporal concepts (today, yesterday, long ago), social concepts (rule of law, law of nature, positive law, written and unwritten law) as well as the conceptualization of events (War of Independence, Constitutional Convention), persons (Founding Fathers) and places (Philadelphia, New York, Washington D.C.). Fenton (1977) has reported that understanding the basic values inherent in the Constitution presents an instructional requirement possible only when students' moral reasoning capabilities have developed to stage 5 on Kohlberg's moral reasoning scale. The Constitution assumes a fundamental moral climate, "the existence of basic rights - life, liberty, equality," all of which are formal concepts fully meaningful at the principled level of stage 5 (p. 102). These fundamental concepts which are essential to an understanding of citizenship responsibility, represent a great pedagogic challenge to the junior high school teacher.

Clearly this is an extraordinary task. From a developmental point of view the teacher would endeavor to anticipate difficulties in comprehension by looking at the "**form** (the complexity of instructions, illustrations, format) as well as the **content** (concepts, materials, examples) of curriculum materials" and endeavor to determine in what fashion the subject matter can be appropriately used by the learner (Elkind, 1981, p.21).

It can be inferred that eighth grade social studies teacher will want to be attentive to developmental phenomena for another important reason. Just as the students can not competently construct meaning from subject matter presented in a manner too far beyond their existing abilities, they also will be disinterested in material which is too far below their developmental level. The instructional context requires understanding on the part of the teacher of both extremes. Adolescents are experiencing new possibilities, new avenues of thoughtfulness. They can begin to marvel at the delight of language play including the conscious use of simile and metaphor, handling multiple and varying interactions of words and sentences, comprehending abstractions and second-order concepts, and to think about their thoughts. The teachers' choice of content, activities and materials has important implications for the students' learning in general, but the teachers' choices in those areas where the learning is significantly formal will be most important.

Summary: The basic premise of this institute is that 8th grade United States history classes should be taught with a focus on the Constitution. Not only should students study a unit on the Constitution, as is commonly done in most classes at the present time, but every other unit which is taught

through out the school year should be explicitly designed with the Constitution in mind. Three good reasons which support this premise are:

1. Civic education is the central purpose of 8th grade United States History Courses.
2. The Constitution, its history and meaning are at the heart of Civic education
3. Adolescence students are at a particularly appropriate period of development for civic education.

It is in the study of the Constitution and all the decisive events as well as the intellectual encounters which give meaning to the Constitution that the student can best comprehend the struggle of American women and men to achieve high ideals of human dignity and civic responsibility.

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